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ABSTRACT

Local historical investigation can make history more relevant and allow national trends to be understood as they were reflected in local incidents. Research-based historical reenactment is growing in popularity throughout North America but has had limited use in classrooms because of overreliance on textbooks and teacher concerns about curriculum mandates and lack of resources. This paper outlines a step-by-step process for exploring "living history" within the classroom. Through this process, a teacher and class can formulate, plan, research, rehearse, and perform role-playing presentations for class, school, or community that meet and enhance state or provincial mandated curriculum objectives. The steps are: (1) getting comfortable (clarifying the process, reassuring students about unfamiliar activities, identifying local resources); (2) warming up to the idea (assuming small roles based on familiar historical figures, focusing on conversations "in character" that provoke class discussion); (3) teacher role (facilitating student efforts to "shape" the role by creating meaning from the research and performance); (4) researching a period character and his or her lifestyle and context; (5) choosing among a real historical person, a composite character, or an appropriate stock character; (6) completing a character outline sheet to formulate a fully developed character; (7) trying out the characters within the class; and (8) performing for school or community. Includes tips for developing characterizations and a character outline. (Author/SV)

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# Living History as an Experience

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## ABSTRACT

History is perceived by too many students and a good portion of the general public as "boring," stilted, and a series of facts, figures, and dates representing very little in lasting significance or authentic learning. The purpose of this paper/workshop is to demonstrate that history can be brought to life and internalized in an authentic, lasting fashion in a variety of situations (school, community, etc.) by people of any age from six to ninety-six. This paper/workshop will demonstrate the step-by-step process by which any teacher and his class, can formulate, prepare, plan, research, rehearse and present role-playing presentations for class, school, and/or community that meet and significantly enhance state/provincial mandated curriculum objectives. An effort will be made to show that when an individual enhances his awareness of his immediate environment, by assuming the roles of researched former citizens of the community, it helps to dramatically integrate the two key learning environments of school and community.

## "One Man in His Time Plays Many Parts . . ."

Much has been written over the last 30–40 years about the importance of local historical investigation as a way of bringing to history students an "increased interest and a heightened sense of realism" (Brown & Tyrrell, 1961, p. 1) and the power this approach has to make history "more relevant" and allow national trends to be more fully understood "when reflected in local incidents" (Lord, 1964, p.8). Brown and Tyrrell (1961) even went as far as to theorize that local history, properly used, could be useful in developing "community consciousness just as national history has been used to develop a national consciousness" (p. 12).

The recent growth in historical reenactment throughout North America, encompassing every epoch from the French–Indian Wars to the Vietnam War

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has sparked a real interest in the use of reenacting as an effective teaching resource and as a means of "bringing history to life." Charles la Rocca (1993) writes about the experiences his students had with American Civil War reenactment involvement that ". . . they have come to think of local civil war soldiers as real people, with all the nobility and frailties of any other human being" (p. 44).

Although these ideas and projects are certainly commendable and reveal the great potential that the study of local history and the advocacy of "living history" has, it still, for the most part, remains the domain of a few brave souls who dare to be different and dare to remove the study of history from the sacrosanct realm of the textbook into the real world immediately outside the classroom. The reality of the average classroom, whether it is elementary, secondary, college, or university, is, for the most part, one of straight rows, overreliance on the textbook, and an unnecessary emphasis on a litany of facts, figures, and dates with few attempts at relating world events to local events or the thoughts of world leaders to the thoughts of local citizens as expressed in diaries, journals, or newspapers of the particular time period under study. As Ron Brandt states in his article on authentic learning in *Educational Leadership Magazine* (1993), " . . . all too frequently we turn what could be concrete activity into abstract exercises" (p. 2).

As a result, it can be easily deduced that, if the entire concept of the use of local history and the exploration of "living history" within classrooms is a tentative activity, then the next logical step of actually endorsing role-playing within those same classrooms enjoys a very limited usage and popularity. However, in all likelihood, most instructors are not deliberately refusing to see the value of such activities nor are most of them diametrically opposed to such approaches. In fact, there is a very high probability that the average

teacher sees great value in them. However, many instructors feel that they lack the expertise to adequately employ those resources and at the same time meet all the requirements of the curriculum. Others would argue that they are neither "local historians" nor even from the area in which they teach and, therefore, not familiar with local history resources and would not feel comfortable in exploring this approach. Others would suggest that to move the study of historical themes and eras from the realm of the mandated course textbook to the stage where students are actually assuming the roles of important historical characters/local citizens falls into the realm of the drama teacher, or at least the English instructor, and is certainly well beyond the limited range of a traditionally oriented history/social studies teacher. While it is easy to understand how these objections have come about, they do not, in our judgment, represent serious obstacles for any teacher from any background if the approach is a concerted, step-by-step approach as outlined in this paper/workshop.

**Step One — Getting Comfortable**

Both teacher and student must feel comfortable if the shift from a text-oriented exploration of history to a local living-history emphasis is to be a successful one. The instructor must feel confident that the curriculum-mandated aims and objectives are being met and that the research and information done within the classroom are being effectively presented. The student, on the other hand is in need of reassurance that he will receive help, direction, and guidance in the initial research attempts and that she is not going to be graded on acting expertise. The key component to classroom success is the reassurance that the process will be a gradual one and that the text will never be totally abandoned. All participants, teachers and students alike, will move into this new approach with caution and a minimum of pressure.

The initial need to find suitable local resources for the research component of the local history approach can be equally shared by student and teacher. Very few places exist where there are not suitable local resources available for historical research. Most areas have libraries or local historical societies that have large or small repositories of local resources. Important sources include letters, journals, estate records, court records, church records, cemetery records, local histories, local newspapers on microfilm, and books. In almost all cases, there are bound to be some local resources available for the research of at least one topic, theme, or time period in the course being taught.

**Step Two — Warming up to the Idea**

Once the research base has been established and clearly identified, both student and instructor must then get comfortable with the concept of role playing. To begin the process, it might be easier to assume small roles based on familiar historical figures that most students would have at least a passing knowledge of (i.e., Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, etc.) and role play them in "warm-up" sessions. Students could be given the task of briefly researching a better-known character from the time period currently under study and coming to class prepared to speak, without the aid of costumes or props, to one other person and then eventually to a small group of fellow students who may or may not be "in character." Conversations rather than speeches should last a maximum of three minutes and be designed to provoke discussion and further questions rather than to present a complete, polished character. The point should be made to these fledgling role players that they need not know a great deal of information about a character initially but that they should be able to take a character's key achievements, contributions, character traits, quirks, and so on, and be able to comfortably project them filtered through their own personality. From the very onset, students should be reminded that

the assuming of a role of a character does not require the skills of an actor but rather the skills of living and observing. We all play many roles and our language, attitude, body language, facial expressions, and manners change as we play all the roles life requires of us (i.e., daughter, student, baby-sitter, employee, etc.). This task, with even just a small amount of practice, should not constitute a major dilemma as individuals, at any age, are capable of drawing upon " . . . a wide range of role behavior appropriate to the social context and the situational expectations of others" (Clark, Dobson, Goode, & Needlands, 1997, p. 24).

**Step Three — Walking The Walk . . .**

The focal point of the "warm-up" sessions should be to concentrate on the creation of fresh insights and new understandings of the character, as well as the historical time period, not only for the "portrayer," but more importantly for the audience experiencing and/or interacting with the character interpretation. There should not be an emphasis on creating a "script" and memorizing it but rather on the compilation of a series of interesting, key, anecdotal points concerning the character that can be naturally placed into a "conversational" format that is comfortable and natural for the individual "actor."

The teacher during this introductory period will come to visualize her role as one of facilitator, coach, encourager, and historical guide (in an assumed role) who maintains the integrity of the exercise by helping individual students "shape" the role being created. This "shaping" is really the application of form to the teaching materials (the content), in order to offer students the most effective opportunities for creating meaning (knowledge and insight) from the research and performance. The teacher must always keep in mind

that a "template" is being established in these early sessions for all future first-person explorations and presentations.

The instructor will also soon realize that there is no need for him to have anything more than a very basic grasp of dramatic presentations in order to create a very successful first-person scenario. The most important quality the teacher brings to the activity is her love of history and knowledge of what needs to be covered in the course.

**Step Four — Talking the Talk . . .**

Once the research base has been established and students are relatively comfortable with the initial phase of role playing, the focus can then shift from the research of the more famous character to the central focus of the exercise which is to assume the role of local citizens who played a role, to a greater or lesser extent, in the development and advancement of the local scene during the time under study in the classroom. The degree of involvement and the relative importance of the character researched and portrayed is of little importance. The real measure of a character portrayal is how realistically and clearly one can recreate the lifestyle of a period, reflecting the essence of a real individual, his reactions to everyday problems, her attitudes to the events of the day, personal commentary on local, national, and international events and social issues. The "period character's" strength lies in the creation of the personal, the human, and the intimate and not in being a fountain of factual information devoid of context.

**Step Five — Decisions, Decisions**

Through the task of researching local resources, students may narrow their choices to two or three characters, decide to create a composite character, or settle on a stock character (i.e., miller, tavern keeper, merchant, farmer, teacher, etc.) appropriate to the time as well as to the local milieu.

Once the local period character has been decided upon by the student, the attempt at establishing a relatively authentic representative from the era and locality begins. Adhering to the format/template established in step #3, the students should be given time "to create themselves again."

**Step Six — What's Old Is New**

A period character is a man, woman, or child who can convincingly portray, from a physical, mental, and vocal point of view, a three-dimensional person from the past. It implies a commitment to speaking and acting in the first person (the "I" voice and not the "They" voice). The key component in the creation of this character, once adequate research has been done, is the commitment to play a role to the best of their abilities and to concentrate on constantly creating, and recreating, a fully "fleshed-out" character. This can be initiated by completing a character outline sheet (see attached example sheet).

Appropriate period clothes, props, and accents are, of course, desirable but not in any way absolutely necessary. A very believable character can be conjured up simply through knowledge, facial expression, body language, and the impetus to engage others in meaningful conversation. Meaningful conversation should include, but is not limited to, the discussion of such topics as health, finances, politics, social conditions, religion, clothes, food, marriage, children, war, and neighbors, for example.

**Step Seven — Coming of Age**

Once the character has been "born," he will want to have a chance to interact with other "characters" within the class. As with the warm-up session, conversation should commence with partners and then move to larger groups and eventually, if feasible and acceptable to the participants, to presentations to the entire class. As characters grow and they become more comfort-

able with their roles, they may have the desire to move outside of the classroom and interact with the school at large or even the community. At this stage, the organization of a "spirit walk" may be desirable. Within the school, a half-day could be organized where small groups of students, suitably prepared beforehand, could be led from station to station (inside or outside of the school) by a "Spirit Guide" to meet and interact with a variety of "spirits" from the area's past and, most likely, from a variety of time periods (a "timeline" situation).

**Step Eight — Taking the Show on the Road**

The next step, after the characters and routine of the "spirit walk" are well established and all participants are very comfortable, would be to "take the show on the road" and perform a series of "spirit walks" out in the community, using appropriate sites, landmarks, or areas associated with the character as backdrops. The latter approach has been employed by the authors for several years with a great deal of success on all fronts. Not only do the students internalize a great deal of information about history and their community, but the activity serves the purpose of educating the local citizens about their area's past and generating a fair amount of tourist interest as well. Some "community spirit walks" that we have operated have involved a combination of more than fifty students (elementary, secondary, university) as well as several non-students (ranging in age from seven to seventy) and have run once every ten minutes, with groups of twenty to thirty people, for three hours a night over a span of three nights!

In addition to the many contributions this approach makes to the history classroom, the drama classroom, the school, and the local community, there are some very specific skills that are developed within individual students. A few of those skills are researching, problem solving, creative think-

ing, decision making, reasoning, presenting, self-discipline, teamwork, conceptualizing, tolerance, and risk taking.

Using the step-by-step process outlined in this paper, teachers and students, at any level, can easily and effectively experience this magical and meaningful world of escape and discovery. If the mark of truly authentic learning is evidenced through commitment, risk taking, and personal ownership, then the art of historical role-playing promises a glimpse of a truly authentic approach where new, meaningful, and engaging insights are only "a character away."

**A Guide to Developing Characterizations**

You need to develop a well-rounded, credible, and authentic character of your time period. In order to do this, you will need a better understanding of your character than documentation alone can provide. A biographical sketch of your character will give you parameters to interpret all the historical information you study. You should end up with a biography of your character's life experiences.

Do not assume that your twentieth-century reaction to information is the reaction your period character would have. You need to have an understanding of the cultural atmosphere of your time period and where your character fits into that environment. Determine what types of events your character could have experienced, and if you are relating this to your audience, is it believable?

Our purpose is to accurately inform and educate the public about the life and history of the time while making it personal and interesting. In order to do this, you need to become a period person with a past, present, and future to relate.

**CHARACTER OUTLINE**

Character Name:

Birth Date: Age Now:

Birth place and circumstances of birth:

Were you raised by your parents?

Nationality/Ethnic Background:

Mother:

Father:

Ancestry:

What significant circumstances, if any, during your childhood affect your character?

What habits, problems, or benefits have resulted from these circumstances?

How have current or past events in local or world history affected your character?

What is your present family situation?

How do you feel about your present family status?

What is your religious affiliation and how has this affected your current situation?

What is your physical condition?

Were you educated?

What is your profession and professional status?

What is your present economic/social status?

Is your appearance and demeanor appropriate to your economic/social status?

What about your appearance or demeanor relates to the audience who you are?

Where do you live and how did you get to this event or site?

Why are you at the site or event?

How do you feel about being there?

List 3–6 significant conditions or events in the life of your character.

**Summary**: In a paragraph, describe your character in terms of personality, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, and relations with others.

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